

METHOW VALLEY CITIZENS COUNCIL



# VALLEY VOICE

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SPRING / SUMMER 2023

**Ghost Bears of the  
North Cascades**

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**Chiliwist — The  
Path Through**

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# BRINGING BACK THE GHOST BEARS OF THE NORTH CASCADES

Grizzly bears lived in the North Cascades for thousands of years until they were hunted and trapped close to local extinction by the early 1900s. There are not currently enough bears in the North Cascades to recover on their own. With a vast, wild space of nearly 10,000 square miles, the North Cascades is one of the few intact ecosystems remaining in the contiguous U.S. where we can recover grizzly bears. Photo: C. Barfoot

Grizzly bears have disappeared from the North Cascades. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to return them to their native habitat.

DR. BILL GAINES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
WASHINGTON CONSERVATION SCIENCE INSTITUTE

*Bill Gaines has over 30 years of experience in natural resource management and conservation, working for both private and public agencies and has published over 60 peer-reviewed articles and technical reports. Over the decades, he has spent many days and nights in search of the elusive grizzly bear in the North Cascades.*

## SHELLROCK PASS — FALL 2020

*I sit high up on a ridge looking down at the vastness of the Eureka Creek valley. The valley stretches due west from me then makes a sharp rounded turn as it flows south. I've spent the better part of two days trying to sort out how to get into this valley, wandering around on its ridges and high basins but failing to find a safe passage into its inner depths. Still uncertain how to access the valley bottom to set up any sample sites in our search for the elusive North Cascades grizzly bear, I am beginning to think this valley may just be too remote, vast, and difficult to enter.*

*The valley is rimmed by black and gray rock that forms*

*huge faces and ridges of the high peaks. Gorgeous basins lie beneath the summits, highlighted with reds and purples from the huckleberry whose leaves have turned color with the fall season. The valley is lined with a ring of gold — alpine larch in full fall glory. Green forests along the bottom are interspersed with meadows and interrupted by the powerful forces of avalanches that form long chutes cutting through the forest. A breeze blows over me. I zip up my jacket and windshell. The cold wind tells a message of the coming of winter, of a time when bears go within. A time of introspection as I withdraw from the summer.*

*And then I imagine her. She is roaming through the high basins, gathering what is left of the season's fruits, knowing what the cold and shortened days are telling her. It is time to find a den. She knows she's entering the den without being pregnant... again. This valley is all she knows. Taught by her mother before she died, she knows all she needs to survive. If only she could find a mate to sustain her species. The deep snows will come soon. She will take her last bites of food, content that she has put on enough weight to make it through the winter. She will slide into her cozy den and fall asleep, thinking that perhaps next year will be different.*

*She will be 14 years old when she next comes out of her den in the spring. She knows that her time to have a cub is fast running out. The sad reality is that most likely she will die alone, unable to find another of her kind. And we humans will have missed an opportunity to lend a helping hand to another species, to right the wrongs of our past. Instead, the grizzly bear of the North Cascades will be but a ghost haunting the memories of those who knew and cared.*

I am often asked: “Why do we need to recover grizzly bears in the North Cascades?”; “Isn’t the ecosystem functioning just fine without them?” I usually answer the question something like this: there are many reasons to try to recover grizzly bears in the North Cascades, from legal obligations brought by the Endangered Species Act, to aesthetic reasons of wanting to be able to see these amazing animals and to know they are there, to ecological reasons that describe the role they play in shaping ecosystems and how they can be used to assess ecosystem health.

I then offer to the person who asked the question that it is up to each individual to come to their own decision on why, or why not, we should return grizzly bears to the North Cascades. I offer my own reasoning: as a scientist, I see grizzly bears playing a key ecosystem

function — they maintain healthy meadows by acting as rototillers, dispersing seeds from the many plants they eat. Many of the roles bears play in ecosystems are subtle and not likely to be noticed by the casual observer, and many roles we have yet to understand. We have very few places where we have a full complement of our native carnivores to study — the North Cascades could be one of them. With its vast wild space of nearly 10,000 square miles, the North Cascades offers one of the few places in our country, in our world, that is large enough to consider recovering a full complement of these magnificent animals.



The North Cascades provides ideal habitat for grizzly bears. One hundred of the 124 plant species that bears primarily feed on grow in the North Cascades recovery area. Photo: NPS/Eric Johnston

As a grizzly bear expert, I’m often asked about bear attacks. On more than one occasion, I’ve had a person approach me after my presentation is over, clearly shaken by the idea of seeing a bear. Often they tell me that they are supportive of conservation efforts, but that they have an overwhelming fear of bears. I recall one woman in a class I was teaching visibly shaken by the pictures of bears (both grizzly and black bears) I projected on the wall. She described her fear as something that was almost “primal” and difficult to control.

It is wired in our DNA to fear animals that at one time in our distant past posed the most significant threat to us. Our genetics warn us of a danger that still exists in some places but is extremely rare





Left: The Eureka Creek Valley is one of many wild and remote places Bill Gaines has searched for signs of grizzly bears in the North Cascades. Photo: Bill Gaines

compared to other factors that today account for most of human mortalities. Our genetics have yet to catch up with the realities of our current lives. Our primal fears should be focused on the factors that cause us the greatest harm, like automobiles and guns! As I researched more about this to gain my own understanding, I thought back to some of my experiences and I realized that I too have these same primal fears but through repeated exposure to wild places and by educating myself about the realities of bear attacks, I have learned to overcome these fears, to put them in proper perspective. Instead, I lie awake at night worrying about our daughter driving home from college!

The last reason I give for returning grizzlies to the North Cascades is that we as humans are responsible for making them into ghost bears. Grizzlies were in the North Cascades for thousands of years until local settlers hunted, trapped and poisoned them to local extinction in the 1800s and early 1900s. Hudson Bay Company collected 3,188 grizzly bear pelts from nearby trading posts between 1826 and 1857! As the population of grizzlies dwindled, government trappers were hired to rid the west of the remaining wolves, bears, and carnivores in an effort to protect

livestock and enhance numbers of big game.

By the late 1960s, grizzly bears were rarely seen in the North Cascades and the Washington Department of Game estimated their numbers to be about 10. However, in 1967, Rocky Wilson, a Cascade mine operator and veteran packer, killed a large bear in Fisher Creek whose “hide measured 6 feet and 11 inches from nose to tail, and the claws were 3 ¼ inches long” according to a newspaper article about the incident. Mr. Wilson was the last known person to legally kill a grizzly bear in the North Cascades.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, considerable efforts were made by state and federal biologists to determine the number of grizzly bears that still remained in the North Cascades. Based largely on tracks and sightings, biologists estimated the number of grizzly bears in the North Cascades to be no more than 10-20 animals by the mid-1990s.

In 2014, an additional evaluation was made of the available grizzly bear reports in the North Cascades to determine if the remaining bears met the definition of a “population.” I participated on the team of biologists who conducted this review. The determination: there were not enough grizzly bears to recover on their own and without any human intervention the grizzly bear would go locally extinct in the North Cascades.

I’ve been working for much of my professional life to study the ghost bears of the North Cascades, finding occasional traces — a track here, a suspicious photo turned in by a hiker. Over time, the evidence of their existence in the North Cascades has considerably reduced. If we are to have this iconic native species in the North Cascades, they will need our help. ♦

*The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades will be released in July. The National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be seeking comment on their recovery proposal which will seek to slowly (3-7 bears a year for 5-10 years to build to an initial population of 25 bears) re-introduce bears into the North Cascades. More information about the proposal and how to comment can be found at: [www.mvcitizens.org/grizzlyrecovery](http://www.mvcitizens.org/grizzlyrecovery)*

Inslee's staff. This is a meeting that probably would not have happened 20 or even 10 years ago. In the past, similar tours for policymakers have been coordinated to showcase MVCC's advocacy work, highlight problems we address, and promote our success stories. But now my thoughts skip to how I can share this opportunity — how it can be beneficial to our community.

The thing is, our work today not only thrives on convening and collaborating, it requires it. The issues we face have become exponentially more complex and multi-dimensional, requiring an array of strategies and expertise to find the best solutions. After this year's legislative session, during which MVCC's Action Fund team spent significant time coordinating with nonprofits from the valley, around the region, and across the state, the opportunity was calling me to be inclusive of areas where MVCC is not taking the lead, areas where success relies on groups coming together to collaborate and share their work.

Immediately, Sarah Jo's comments over coffee affirmed my gut feelings about why we need to keep doing this. In one short conversation, we connected environmental justice with zoning and affordable housing, and tied them both to equitable access to recycling and repair services. We discussed an important link between composting and wildlife conservation. Given enough time, we probably could have connected more dots, and filled our table with other problem-solvers from different parts of the community, generating creative solutions with our new partnerships. And that would have been a good thing for both our organizations and for our community.

Historically, MVCC has been best known for our advocacy role and willingness to take on controversial issues (e.g. an international destination ski resort, Okanogan County land and water use, rules, and enforcement). These are a key part of our brand. At the same time, the issues we face have become exponentially more complex and multi-dimensional, requiring an array of strategies and expertise. Thus, we are often called upon to act as a convener or as participant at a table convened by others. Recent very successful examples of our role as convener/leader are the Methow Headwaters campaign and the process which culminated in the Methow Climate Action Plan. The North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative and the Methow Valley Housing

Solutions Network are groups convened by others where we've played a critical role relevant to our mission.

In the coming 3-5 years, we anticipate significant opportunities for coalition building around some of our community's most significant challenges including how to allocate and conserve water, how to manage our lands and forests in light of increasing wildfire risk and the impacts of burgeoning recreation on wildlife. As chronicled in "Lost Homeland," by Richard Hart, the culture of the Methow People was to be welcoming and collaborative. By continuing that tra-



The Methow Headwaters campaign was a recent example of a very successful collaborative campaign to prevent industrial-scale mining on 340,079 acres of land around the headwaters of the Methow River. Photo: Hannah Dewey

dition, we are honoring the spirit of that culture, and the spirit of the land to which it is connected. To be successful and have the greatest community benefit we will have to work across sectors — with nonprofits, agencies, tribal members, governments, businesses and passionate individuals.

The future we are walking into contains many uncertainties. I am convinced that we have been brought here at this time to walk toward that future together, and to succeed by confronting it with the best of what we all bring to this special place on Earth. ♦